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AN INVESTIGATION OF SOME REFINED ASPECTS OF TENSION IN PAINTING

by

Anne Katharine Salley

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INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the creation of a painting, there sometimes comes a feeling that art is a contradictory affair, disordered, yet ordered; without direction, yet somehow directed; free-wheeling, yet responsible; at once personal and universal. Therefore, this paper, written by a painter, concerning painting, can do nothing else than reflect these contradictions. This paper will not be merely a description, dissecting the elements in the paintings. It will be an attempt to find and interpret the spirit of the paintings and to discover the sources for this personal and particular spirit.

Here, then, is one painter's statement. It will be as particular as spring, 1960, Greensboro, North Carolina, and as wide as everything seen, heard, and felt. It may include all thought and all action from every place and all time, for there are infinite inter-relationships, beyond our consciousness, coming together in any person. As an hourglass, with many grains of sand, lets a few at a time through its narrow opening, until they have collected again, so any person is a funnel for all experience, and all experience is a part of what he creates.

PART I

THE MAIN THEME: REFINED TENSION

A painting seizes and suspends a moment. The spirit of this suspended moment will be very different in the work of different painters. To describe the "moment" that this painter hopes to have captured, here are three examples: there is the moment when a soap bubble is about to disintegrate into the air, and the moment is charged with suspense; a young child holds a cup full of milk with precise abandon, and the adult watches the milk teeter on the edge and wonders that it does not spill; the end of a melting icicle gathers water, and one watches fascinated as this water increases, getting heavier, and prepares to drop. One would call it tension, and that is the principal concern here, but it is quiet tension, not the violent sort, that this painter is concerned with. In Hans Hofmann's paintings, one finds a violence that is a shout, as opposing forces clash. The concern in this thesis is with a delicate balance, the exquisite contradiction that treads a fine line. The world today is faced with this particular kind of tension. For example, we call the struggle between Communist and democratic forces the "Cold War," meaning that while these forces are opposing one another, they are restrained for the moment, leaving a tension which has not dissipated itself in violence. The artist is subject to these conflicting forces from without, because he is a product of the world in which they exist.

The artist is subject to his own personal version of this conflict,

arising from contradictory conditions in his creative life. These contradictions in turn manifest themselves in the paintings.

The word contradiction seems mild when compared with conflict, opposition, or rebellion. It is chosen because it implies a single state, in which the state of opposition exists; whereas the other words imply a breaking apart, with two forces at odds. Contradiction has more restrained implications since it describes a state in which opposition exists but has not shown itself as open conflict.

We are always searching for "eternal truths," and when we find one, we also find that it has another side, opposite to our first view, yet equally true. The very fact that a thing contradicts another denies, in one sense, the idea of an absolute, but in another sense, it gives new dimension to the concept of the absolute. Contradictory forces, working within any given state, cause change to come about through their opposition. Recently mankind has come to believe that change is a sort of perfect state, that is, absolute. When the concept of change becomes absolute, then the term absolute seems to shed its static, fixed implications and to take on dynamic and energetic meanings.

The background of thought in the western world, until fairly recently, has been that of establishing an order that would be true for all times, an absolute order. The Greeks were expressing, as far as they were concerned, an ultimate perfection. The practical Romans built their roads to be modern for centuries with never a thought that needs would change. The men of the Renaissance were well aware of their great contributions in breaking through many barriers and had the grand vision

of building a scheme of ideas which would last. Our ideas do have sources in Renaissance thought, but there are other sources as well. The First World War, before it was followed by a second, was called the "World War," with the expectation that it would be the only one. Only in our era has the idea of change, of destroying the old to make way for the new, as a continuing process, been so apparent. For example, schools are built to last for a limited amount of time so that the shifting population and changing needs can be accommodated. And we no longer set up our philosophies to last forever.

The artist has been especially involved in this process of change, as he rejects old methods in his search for new methods of expression. He is aware that art is in a constant state of change, as is society. He participates in this change, but is at the same time trying to find through his work something that will transcend the change and have more than a brief significance. This, too, is part of the contradiction. We accept painting as being "of the moment," of being an expression of our particular world; yet we hope that whatever measure of truth is manifest in our paintings will be more than a momentary one. We would like to create paintings containing that intangible spark which makes them significant forms of human expression when measured against past, present, or future.

There has been an attempt in these thesis paintings to find a significance in the contradictory nature of life, especially in the life of an artist. Contradiction produces an uneasy state because of its denial of any set scheme. Because there is a part of man's thought which

likes an order which is fixed, tension arises in the face of the contradictory nature of things. If, as this writer believes, there is increased awareness of contradiction, of various views and attitudes, of various contrary states within one situation, then it is this awareness that causes the tension. It is not a tension that is violent, but a restrained state in which there is the possibility of open conflict.

PART II

SOURCES OF THE CONTRADICTION

Rebellion has been part of man's nature since his beginnings, and rebellion has been discussed often by philosophers. Both rebels and philosophers sometimes think that they have the final answer on the subject, but as rebellion is still with us, no answer is the final one thus far. Rebellion has taken on a special character in contemporary America because we find ourselves in the peculiar situation of having no actual battles to fight. When the American continent was new, there were physical frontiers to be challenged. To make a shelter and obtain food required immense effort. The struggle was for creature needs. Puritan thought fit in very neatly with the challenge of the new land. The Bible said that man should not "lay up earthly treasures," and since life was austere by its very nature, temptations were not great. Early settlers found that hard work gave them enough for their basic needs, and their religious leaders gave them spiritual uplift by telling them that this hard work, in itself, was good. Two phrases come to mind, illustrating other phases of Puritan thought: the "devil in the flesh," meaning that what was natural in man was possessed by the devil; and such sayings as, "Idle hands are the devil's playthings." This saying implies its opposite, that anyone who was busy doing something "worthwhile" was staying out of the clutches of this dangerous devil. The militant and fanatic proponents of the Puritan doctrine tried to impose their rigid

rules, but the human spirit would not be so easily quelled. Then, too, the bounteous richness of the American continent worked against the idea of the austere life. Yet Puritan thought has colored American ideas. What we consider Puritan virtues such as thrift, industry, and the "simple life" are still admired today.

As the people prospered, the satisfaction of creature needs became realized. Shelter, food, and clothing were plentiful. The interest became that of the kind of shelter, the variety of food, and the quantity and style of clothing. Hard work, which was considered good, proved also to bring material benefit. Today, 1960, industriousness remains, but the goals have become muddled. Books and articles talk of "status" as being the goal of Americans. Many things that were sought after have been found, and they are empty treasures. There is increased leisure time, and it is spent, not in increased joy, but in the hard work of relaxing. We have obtained for ourselves many goals that other ages sought after. To an amazing degree, we have freed ourselves from ignorance, from economic poverty, from political oppression, and from religious dictates. Yet much as children after all the Christmas presents are opened, we look, feeling unsatisfied, for something not yet revealed.

We have achieved a measure of freedom, and we have found it an uneasy state. Protestantism has done its share towards making it so, because it leaves the responsibility with the individual. It assumes him to be a sinner, but his confession and penance must come from within him, and only he can know if he is absolved. This is a difficult role for most people; they look to see what the other person is doing, and they band together,

setting up rules, which become, for example, the altruistic acts of the church "circles," or "good manners," governing behavior. Freedom, then, is used many times only to set up new rules.

Freedom has a will-o'-the-wisp quality. When one begins to use freedom for a purpose, that is, to set up a philosophy or set of rules, then the very concept of freedom is a contradiction because one must ask, "Freedom from what?" and "Freedom to do what?" Freedom spans these two questions and is found in its purest sense only in the brief moment when rebellion becomes successful and before the rebel feels the need of positive goals. As soon as goals are set up, restrictions are placed on the freedom.

There is a pat discription of existentialist philosophy which says that man is "ultimately free and ultimately responsible." This might describe the artist's role in relation to the eternal quest for freedom. By being an artist, he needs this freedom and affirms that it is necessary to fulfill his personal responsibility. But how free is this freedom for an artist? It is limited at once in that he is not free to commit himself completely to established orders. He opposes the status quo because it sets up absolutes that are not his. Neither is he free to be only a rebel. Total social rebellion is impossible for an artist for two reasons. Too much energy is expended in the act of rebellion, energy which must be directed elsewhere. Secondly, a painter cannot spend time only in the negative activity of going against things, because painting is an affirmation. So the rebellion is of a personal and often quiet sort, where the individual simply withdraws from social

institutions when they restrict his freedom. He does not try to destroy them because without these institutions, against what would he rebel? How would he assert his individuality? Informal advice to the artist might run like this: Leave the joiners alone; even encourage them and think kind thoughts about them, because, if they come over to your side, how can you oppose them?

Withdrawal is not the final answer, for on a personal level the artist is caught in difficult conflicts. He has to set himself somewhat apart from society because he is an individual; yet he cannot be completely apart because an artist, as any person, feels a need for human alliances. While he can be deeply committed to these relationships, there is some portion of his thought which appraises any situation for its worth to him as a painter. The responsibility of an artist is that of painting. While an artist has freedom to enter into the various activities and alliances of human life, he is not free to commit himself entirely. He participates only to the extent that he derives personal satisfaction from the situation, but withdraws when the situation restricts the freedom necessary to him as a painter.

To attain freedom without purpose is useless, so that the artist is "ultimately responsible," insofar as he is aware, to use his measure of freedom to some end. Left without a ready-made philosophy and with his freedom, an artist must set up his own frame of reference. The contradiction is in the opposition of what is natural against self-imposed rules. As artists, we admire what is natural. In the materials of painting there is a delight in what happens naturally. A line will play on a page almost

of its own accord, and the acute eye delights in it. Alizarin crimson and cobalt blue blend to make one's head swim in the delight of color. A drop of India ink on wet paper is a joy to watch. A slab of paint laid on as if with a trowel is a tactile delight. These are the natural delights of painting. They are not enough.

One may turn to technique or style as a way of ordering this natural beauty, but these are forms of authority. Technique, by definition, is a method, and a method implies repetition of what is already established. "Style," unless it is a personal style, means that there is a "right" way to be sought after. The very act of learning to paint becomes an act of repetition, of learning what is already known. No one would deny the value of learning to paint, but learning is not an end in itself, and there comes a time when what is learned must be learned only to be consciously forgotten.

Thus the artist is caught in another web of contradiction. He encourages what is natural in his paintings, yet he himself must order and put restrictions on it. Even Puritan doctrines, which would seem to be far removed from the province of art, come into play as the artist finds struggle to be necessary. Like the Puritan, he is suspicious of what is too pleasurable; the easy way cannot be the best way. The emotions that are felt most deeply are open to the greatest question.

The scheme that the artist lays out for himself is a very personal one. He cannot look to society for sympathetic understanding, nor can he look to other artists. Many times there is no conscious attempt to set up a philosophy, but a philosophy evolves in the course of painting; and

there comes a time when almost every painter talks about what he is doing. Verbal statement of a personal philosophy is something of which to be wary. When one has found one's own "way," it is easy to become an evangelist, spreading abroad the good news of the "means of salvation." The human personality delights in finding another sympathetic spirit, and a serious discussion between painters will be a persuasive argument for the personal view of each. A painter is alone in his painting; therefore, is alone in any philosophy evolving from his work. There is room for only one in any painter's philosophy; a philosophy is valuable to a painter only insofar as it is solely and uniquely his and even for him it is not fixed, but changing. This aloneness does not always satisfy, for it allows no set plan and no common goals.

These, then, are contradictions in which an artist is involved. Some are basic concerns for all people; some are of special concern to the artist because he is aware of them and their effect on his creative searches. The artist is involved in, yet apart from, human relationships; he learns methods of painting, only to reject them, to make way for new ones, which, in turn, are suspect. He admires the completely natural expression, yet must order it. It is an acute and continual state of opposition in which the artist finds himself.

PART III

THE LOOK OF CONTRADICTION IN THE PAINTINGS

In these thesis paintings, there has been an attempt to take the stuff of this struggle of contradictory forces, and use it as a positive statement in paint. As the struggle is manifest in the paintings, the sound of it would not be a battle shout, but a searching, whispered question that one asks oneself. Visually, it comes through the unexpected and sometimes awkward form the painting takes. The pervading atmosphere of the paintings seems to be that of the dream, and there are certain features in the paintings which give them this quality. Both the form of the unexpected and the appearance of mystery will be examined, but picking the paintings apart is not what is intended. It is hoped, rather, that the central theme will be made clearer by examining a few of its parts.

For any painting to be successful, a uniqueness coming from unfamiliar elements must be present. In these paintings there has been an attempt to create surprise through an effect of intrusion. This intrusion may take the form of a line or shape which imposes itself into the surface. It may be likened to the disturbance of the mirror-image on a smooth pond surface by a breeze; or a seedling, pushing up through the earth; or in the human realm, the assertion of the personality of an individual as it is different from others. These are positive events, and they oppose something in order to exist. The still water is there for the breeze to disturb. The earth is there for the seedling to spring from. Similar-

ities in human personalities must exist for one to be different.

In the paintings the surprise comes in allowing elements to assert themselves. A sudden bit of color will appear at the edge of a canvas; it occurs and is left because it is surprising and unfamiliar. A shape will plunge in from above or in some way be set at an imbalance, and because it looks different from the usual, it becomes a part of the painting. In many of these paintings there are shapes, as distinguished from background. For a certain surprise to exist, it is sometimes necessary for the shapes to intrude into something, and this "something" is the background. It is not a passive area, but contradicts what it surrounds and defines it. The background contains the shapes, and they are pointed up by what is around them; at the same time, through the placement of these shapes or through color relationships between them and the background, there is an uneasy quality which sets up a certain vitality.

In the world of art, this quality of surprise seems to be apparent in the crude or archaic art forms. There are fragments of Spanish Romanesque frescoes set into plaster in the museum at Barcelona. Partly because they are fragmentary and partly because of their lively awkwardness, they have a surprising quality. In the frescoes of Giotto, as he broke through traditional barriers to find new ways of composing and creating plastic form, there is the feeling of the search in progress and a lasting uniqueness. In Archaic Greek statues, in Etruscan Art, in some naive and child art, and in some Abstract Expressionist paintings, there is at the same time a closeness to the sources in nature and a promise not quite fulfilled.

In the beginning stages of an art form, one is conscious of a "felt" search. The awkwardness of it has a certain appeal. There is a disarming quality about awkwardness, as in young animals, that may make one take sympathetic notice. When an expression is made in too stylized and smooth a manner, it lacks a genuine quality that a more awkward expression may have. It might be compared to a man with a severe speech impediment. You feel that if he must struggle to say each word, then it will probably be worth listening to. He cannot allow himself the luxury of small talk and says only what is important to him, and you have the feeling you must listen. In painting, awkwardness may mean that there is a struggle going on to make a statement.

Art in its beginnings, when it is not polished, seems to be a more direct expression than more sophisticated forms. Child art (though its aesthetic value has been over-praised) has, at its best, a direct and frank approach, a boldness of expression that has vitality. There is a freshness of contact, a very personal expression, and a putting-down of what is important rather than merely what is seen. The same freshness of contact is true of "blind contour" drawing, where the artist looks only at what he is drawing, not at the paper on which his drawing is taking shape. Another exercise in drawing is "left-handed" drawing, or drawing done with the hand one is unaccustomed to using. These drawings appear to be closest to the nature of what is seen because style does not intrude between the artist and his subject. Learning too much technique is a dangerous approach to serious painting. Techniques should be learned only to be relegated to the subconscious. One is rightfully suspicious

of too much beauty of style because it becomes a sham if it is overworked. A personal style must come from an inner source, not from a style that is already known. If this inner statement is genuine and there is a searching quality about it, then it may well appear unpolished and a little awkward.

It would seem to follow that child art, naive art, or the earliest works of a great painter would be the works we regard as great art, and this is obviously untrue. In child and naive art, a truly good painting is usually a single occurrence; whereas, with great painting, there is sustained quality. The naive artist is limited by his own ideas of what is good, and his ideas in relation to painting are usually narrow, and he falls into a pattern of repetition. Many great painters did a few paintings at the beginning of their careers which are surprisingly removed from the painter's mature style. An "oriental" painting of Van Gogh's comes to mind. Such paintings do not portray the artist's own search. They are fumbling, true, and awkward, true, but it is a search after something that does not belong to that artist. It is something assumed from without, rather than something which springs from within.

A great painter will always be a little awkward because he is always searching. A painter learns about design, about color, about the act of creating a painting; yet until he finds his own awkward way, he is confined. And once he has explored one way, he must begin the search anew.

There is an awkwardness about these thesis paintings. It was not put there to be awkward, but it occurred in the process of painting and

was allowed to remain where it seemed to bring surprise with it.

Awkwardness is a dangerous and exciting thing to court. It cannot be won by wooing, but must spring from a natural source. This quality must be examined constantly by a painter to be sure it is still genuine, and, when it is genuine, it is meaningful. When it is repeated merely for the sake of effect, it becomes meaningless. It cannot be an end in itself; that is, paintings which are only awkward have little value. A painter who lacks ability in composition may be very awkward, but his paintings will have little worth. Awkwardness is not a final goal, but when it brings a freshness, born of a desire to express an idea in a new way, then it may be one of the painter's means.

In these paintings, the awkwardness of the images is a protest against the surface quality of human existence. The acquisition of social "polish" begins at an early age. The wish to break through the veneer is a common one, but it takes a certain courage to break the surface of social smoothness, and when it does happen, some will term it "awkward" or "gauche," when "natural" might better describe it. There are figures in many of these paintings and the figures are not the debonair types of the advertisements; they are awkward and self-conscious about being so.

Besides awkwardness, which conveys a certain unexpected quality, there are methods in several of the paintings that show the quality of mystery, of the unknown. Within the rectangle, there is a protest against the rigid rule of gravity. Our lives are ruled by gravity to the extent that our every motion is governed by gravitational pulls. The rectangle of a canvas sets up a horizontal and vertical world; it is through these

exact outer edges that a disturbance of gravity within the world of the picture is effected. There is no attempt to set objects whirling. There is a slight tilting of vertical lines, and in some paintings the observer looks down on the images by the means of the illusion of a tilted picture surface.

In several of the paintings, there is a horizon line of sorts, but no linear or aerial perspective. There is almost another dimension going in, but the pictures remain essentially flat. Ground meets sky, and the figures are placed in this setting, but it is all one plane. As an example, in nature, of this flattening of depth: the waters of Cape Cod Bay are always calm, and on foggy mornings, at high tide, one sees the placid pond of the Bay, stretching to the horizon, but the horizon line is difficult to see, and if one looks intently, it begins to flatten itself out, so much that one is convinced that it is a stage set, rising from the water's edge. Water and sky are there, with the sky directly above the water, and both of them flat, as a picture. It is an eerie sensation.

The world contained in these pictures is the world of the dream. They are not nightmares; some are even euphoric daydreams. Most of the paintings have a tinge of the dream climate, in which events are supercharged with the atmosphere surrounding them. In a dream the faces may change, but the atmosphere remains. So it is in these pictures, where the people are faceless, not specific. The reality is in the mood of the situation, rather than in individual definition. Observers have called these figures "ghosts"; and it may well be that they are haunted pictures,

for what is most real to us is often the spirit of the event or person, rather than factual information. By being vague, the figures and situations remain unknown. They allow for multiple interpretations, and no one interpretation will explain them.

There is a sense of the evanescent in these pictures, as in a dream, as if the forms might change at any moment. One of the contradictions in these paintings is that there is a fleeting quality; yet these fleeting gestures are suspended in immobility. These are fugitive forms that appear to have arrived only a moment before and to be on the verge of leaving. But they are fixed in the paintings. The fugitive images in the paintings are a reflection of that condition in life. Time passes, and we attempt to suspend sections of it by making our actions as significant as possible. Through creative acts, there is a chance to create at least an appearance of halting time, and even this carries some satisfaction. At the same time, change is desirable, and it is again a case of contradiction that an ideal state would be that of going forward and standing still.

PART IV

CONCLUSION

When two equal forces meet and oppose one another, it is possible that the result of the meeting might be a neutral one. This is supposing that there are two separate and contrary forces at opposite poles to one another. One possibility is that this impasse might be a fruitful state, from which something else might spring. It is possible to conceive of energy resulting from such a state.

In addition to dual and opposing forces, another consideration is a single state, within which there are contradictory forces present. This view is more to the point in relation to these paintings. The contradictions are set up, and each is dependent on the other for existence, and together, by their contradiction, they convey life to the canvas. It is the case of a given event, which may be viewed from two opposing angles. Our natural inclination for order would prefer that an event be neatly stated in "facts," but facts do not necessarily convey the whole truth. Even the ideas or events which appear simplest are neither black nor white, but some indeterminate and ever-changing shade of gray. Contradictions within a single state create an uneasy condition, yet it is this unrest which produces vitality.

The ambiguous quality of the images in these paintings leaves room for the paintings to have more than single significance. By setting up these contradictions and recognizing them as a positive force, there is

the possibility for continuing vitality to be present in the paintings as long as they exist.

These paintings are an affirmation of ever-present contradiction. Rather than cancelling one another, these opposing elements are in a state of change by being set in continual opposition. The tension is wrought through their co-existence, within a unity. They are part of the same world, yet oppose one another. The contradiction is expressed in a restrained way in the paintings: there has been an attempt to show that a subdued opposition may be ever more acute than one which is in open conflict.

LIST OF PAINTINGS

1. Isolation
2. Intrusion
3. Genesis #2
4. World Enclosed
5. Image Suspended in Green
6. Two Small People in a Green Field
7. The Web
8. Overlooking Patterned Fields
9. Two Figures Approaching
10. Wading in Cool Water
11. Family Group
12. The Pied Piper
13. Five Figures Doing an Impromptu Gavotte
14. The Greeting
15. An Attempt at Throwing
16. A Person Leaving
17. Sheltering Figure

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